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Katherine E. Young

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KATHERINE E. YOUNG

Lermontov's Room

Moscow, 1995

The hollow heart beats evenly.

—Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), "Death of the Poet"

No doubt he himself hurried along here,
up these breakneck stairs, down this corridor,
heels clack-clacking to the rat-tat-tat of
mémère's disapproval. Same old story,
the old and the young: he'll never amount
to much if he doesn't shape up, she just
can't understand what his life is about . . .
His room's restored, cut out of the clouds
breathing sullen, mute, this November day.
A poet's lair—Pushkin above the desk—
the Caucasus engraved, craggy, fantastic—
notebooks lying open, tantalizing,
just far enough beyond the barrier—
and books, those lovely leather-bound Byrons
and Schillers and Chéniers spilling across
shelves like curios in a cabinet.
If you ask the old woman who sits by
the door, she'll recite his poems, rocking
gently with the rhythm, thinking back
to her days at school, when it seemed the most
poetic thing, to die young.